**Hitchin Town Talk**

**Monday 19 October 2020 19:00 – 20:30**

**Present:**

**IA** Cllr Ian Albert

**KH** Cllr Keith Hoskins

**JB** Cllr Judi Billing

**MSH** Cllr Martin Stears-Handscomb

**VB** Cllr Val Bryant

**CB** Cllr Clare Billing

**SC** Cllr Sam Collins

**PC**  Cllr Paul Clark

**MH** Cllr Mike Hughson

Bob Marden Club 85

Glyn Doggett Market Theatre/Hitchin Festival/Mostly Comedy

Keiron Jones Hitchin Folk Club

Cara Baldwin Burnt Lemon Theatre

James Willis Visual Artist

Tom Hardy Hitchin BID Town Centre Manager

Rebekah Nicolas Hitchin Library

Ros Allwood North Herts Museum

**Apologies:**

Cllr David Barnard

Cllr Derrick Ashley

Cllr Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg

Cllr Kay Tart

Cllr IA welcomed everyone into the meeting. Cllr IA spoke about the importance than NHDC places on the arts and thanked Cara Baldwin for raising the Arts as a topic for discussion at a previous Town Talk. Cllr IA outlined the premise of the meeting. He noted that the main objective was to gain a wider understanding of current barriers arts providers are facing and to create an arts cooperative so that best practice can be shared, and collaborative working is encouraged. Cllr IA stated that NHDC don't have significant funding available to help local arts and cultural organisations, but we that NHDC can act as facilitators. Cllr IA ran through a few housekeeping points and then invited Glyn Doggett to open the discussion.

**Glyn Doggett:** an actor, is self-employed and his work is all dependent on audiences. He represents several organisations including Market Theatre, Hitchin Festival and Mostly Comedy based at Hitchin Town Hall.

Market Theatre:

The theatre has never had any grant support and is largely self-sufficient. Up until March, the theatre was doing very well. Their pantomime’s and school touring are a large income generator. The issue now is that their income is depleting. The theatre submitted a bid to the Cultural Recovery Fund to see them through to October 2021, but this was rejected.

The theatre is now calling on the public to support, not just financially but to attend socially distanced shows and use their bar facilities safely where table service is in operation. The theatre is also filming and streaming their shows for those not ready to return to the theatre at present.[**http://www.markettheatre.co.uk/home/**](http://www.markettheatre.co.uk/home/)

**Bob Marden – Club 85:** [**https://club-85.co.uk/**](https://club-85.co.uk/)

The club had their first socially distanced show on Friday 9 October which was successful. The club established a Crowdfunder at the very beginning of the pandemic to appeal to residents and supporters to donate funds to keep them afloat.

The club have been able to purchase a fogging machine to sanitise their venue which they are happy to lend to other organisations.

Bob noted that planning for differing potential lockdown tiers has been complex, but the committee have had many in depth discussions and planning meetings about their policies and procedures in relation to this. Bob is happy to share these discussions in order to assist others in best practice.

The Music Maker Trust has been very supportive, this is a collaborative for Grassroots music venues.

The club are gradually filling up their diary with socially distanced 54 capacity seated events. They hope that they can survive until March 2021 on this model.

**Cara Baldwin – Burnt Lemon Theatre Company (BLTC):** [**https://www.burntlemontheatre.com/**](https://www.burntlemontheatre.com/)

BLTC is a mid-scale touring gig theatre company. It is run by Cara and her two female colleagues. Cara is passionate about an arts collective in Hitchin because they have not secured any work in the town despite trying and Cara being based here. BLTC were currently meant to be touring the UK delivering their shows.

Unfortunately, BLTC were not eligible to access the Cultural Recovery Fund because they are such a new organisation and therefore don’t have first year accounts. However, they have managed to access some funding.

BLTC have created some digital films around activism and young people getting involved in democracy. BLTC have a good support network of theatres across the UK.

Cara noted that the future feels uncertain, but they are now hoping to reach out to schools and young people to increase their impact.

BLTC are funded by Arts Council England.

BLTC are always happy to receive ‘support in kind’ from other organisations as this helps when BID writing to secure grant funding. For example, staff training, workshops, collaborations or simply help with promotion. They are willing to do the same for other organisations too.

**Rebekah Nicolas - Hitchin Library:** [**https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/Libraries-and-archives/Library-opening-hours/Hitchin-Library.aspx**](https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/Libraries-and-archives/Library-opening-hours/Hitchin-Library.aspx)

The library reopened in mid-August; it is currently running a limited browsing service alongside internet usage.

HCC have maintained the 2-metre social distancing rule and therefore this must be adhered to in libraries. This means the libraries capacity is much lower – around 28 people.

In April, the library began delivering Rhyme Time and Story time programmes virtually on a weekly basis. Currently, the reach of these programmes is much less as they are online. Until the library can deliver physical events it will be very challenging.

The libraries current footfall is about 40% in comparison to the same time last year.

The library team are trying to think of a strategy moving forward as the events sector is still very much unknown.

**Keiron Jones - Hitchin Folk Club:** [**http://www.hitchinfolkclub.idnet.net/**](http://www.hitchinfolkclub.idnet.net/)

The club moved to Hitchin Cricket Club at the start of 2020. They only managed 3 concerts before having to start cancelling events. They now only have capacity for 40 people, but they need around 150 people to attend a concert to make it financially viable.

**James Willis – Visual Artist:** [**https://www.jameswillisart.co.uk/**](https://www.jameswillisart.co.uk/)

We are very lucky to have a wide range of arts provision locally. James’ main source of income has been presenting his visual arts pieces on Zoom which has been a positive experience and has broadened his audience and participants dropping into these lectures. James was fortunate to receive a Free-lancers Government Grant.

James explained that the key to surviving is to diverge and think creatively.

The difficultly is trying to plan for the future whilst trying to maintain current projects.

James noted that his appreciation for this discussion forum and is keen to establish a cooperative. James is happy to be contacted via email: jameswillisartist@gmail.com

**Ros Allwood - North Herts Museum:** [**https://northhertsmuseum.org/**](https://northhertsmuseum.org/)

NH Museum has partnered with Stevenage Museum and Open Art Box CIC

To create art packs for people with dementia and their carers. These packs are delivered to the clients homes each week. The pack is based on an object in the museum. Next year, the museum would like to invite the participants to attend the museum and create an exhibition of their work.

The museum has a ‘Where’s Wally’ programme for children over half term.

You can now visit the museum at your own leisure without booking a museum tour.

**Cllr Val Bryant:** How does the museum encourage repeat visitors?

**Ros Allwood:** We provide different exhibitions why change regularly. We also believe tours by different members of staff offer a different perspective. The museum are still offering one tour per day.

Soon there will be an exhibition of old photographs of Hitchin and surrounding villages.

The museum have received some Arts Council funding to purchase a new camera and the team are working on providing better social media content and creating many YouTube videos.

**John Skeeles – Hitchin Historical Society:** [**https://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/**](https://www.hitchinhistoricals.org.uk/)

noted that there was a ‘Hitchin: Glimpses of the Past’ book launch on Saturday 24 October at Hitchin Market Place. Due to the coronavirus pandemic the society were unable to have the typical launch so they had a market stall from 9am – 3pm where ‘Hitchin: Glimpses of the Past’ books were sold for £12 each. The book includes articles from the Hitchin Journal 1978 until 1992. The one article to be significantly updated is on the Archaeology of Hitchin by Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews.

**Tom Hardy - Hitchin Town Centre Manager:** [**https://www.hitchinherts.com/contact-us**](https://www.hitchinherts.com/contact-us)

Hitchin BID had to cancel all events this year. They are planning for all events to take place as usual from April 2021 onwards. The BID are still hoping to turn The Dell into an Open Air Theatre.

Tom highlighted the importance of County Councillors locality budgets and how it’s helped the BID with several community projects.

Tom explained that it is worth organisations keeping the Hitchin Information Centre in mind as they are now doing more to promote local events. Please share your information with the team so that they can circulate it in newsletters, on display boards etc. Equally, you can contact the BID to arrange use of the Market Place for exhibitions etc.

Contact Tom: tom.hardy@hitchinherts.com

**Cllr Keith Hoskins:** next year is Hitchin Festivals 30th year. It has always existed as a forum to showcase arts organisations across the month of July. Perhaps this forum could act as a vehicle for cross collaboration and mutual promotion.

**Cara Baldwin:** one large barrier to the operations of many arts providers is storage space, Burnt Lemon Theatre along with many others need support with this issue.

**Cllr Ian Albert:** mentioned that there are many discussions happening about the use of several NHDC buildings around the town. One of them is Charnwood House, plans are currently in progress for this to be used as a community space.

**Glyn Doggett:** at the beginning of this year, Hitchin Festival started some wider collaborative working. It would be great if the festival to be an umbrella organisation for a cooperative forum.

**Cllr Judi Billing:** we have all become lone workers during this pandemic, but we have so much to learn from the work of visual artists and their experiences.

**Bob Marden – Club 85:** the club are hoping to introduce classical concerts on Sunday evenings.

Bob also noted that he has realised that there is no provision in North Herts for further education for budding musicians. Club 85 would like to offer an informal provision, perhaps of music lessons etc but they wouldn’t be able to offer the Educational Qualification side.

**Cara Baldwin:** perhaps Club 85 could reach out to Hitchin Light Orchestra.

**Cllr Keith Hoskins:** mentioned that there is a Community Engagement Panel on 9 November which will look at how the Council engages with community groups and the use of social media. More details here:

<https://democracy.north-herts.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=296>

Both Cllr KH and Cllr IA encouraged organisations to contact their local Councillors when completing external grant requests as it might help to add a note that they are endorsed by NHDC for instance.

**Tom Hardy - Hitchin Town Centre Manager:** discussed the possibility of creating a ‘Hitchin Arts’ Facebook group, a space to promote, share ideas etc.

**Cara Baldwin:** raised the idea of having a promotional offer in the town where restaurants could offer a discount to theatre goers. This could be publicised in Hitchin BID newsletter.

**Claire Morgan - NHDC Community Engagement Team Leader:** spoke about the possibility of organisations establishing themselves as CIC’s or CIO’s, this would mean that they would be eligible for more funding streams. If an organisation is not a charity/CIC/CIO then another organisation such as Hitchin Festival could apply for funding and hold funds on behalf of another organisation.

**Katie Staddon - NHDC Community Engagement Team:** mentioned that organisations could also benefit from they membership benefits of NHCVS such as assistance with benefits, recruiting trustees, creation of governance documents etc if they become a CIC/CIO. [**https://www.nhcvs.org.uk/**](https://www.nhcvs.org.uk/)

**Cllr Clare Billing:** explained that a ‘What’s On’ arts and culture page for Hitchin would be useful so that all of the information is in one place. It would make it easier for residents to find an activity and therefore they would be more likely to support local organisations events.

**Cara Baldwin:** noted that the ‘Hitchin Diversity and Culture’ page already exists on Facebook which she has been assisting Tony Williams with. <https://www.facebook.com/hitchinisdiverse/>

**Cllr Martin Stears-Handscomb:** the idea of an Arts Hub Facebook group is great, perhaps we could also have a regular agenda item to discuss the arts at Hitchin Town Talk or Hitchin Committee.

**Cllr Ian Albert:** suggested inviting representatives from Arts organisations to speak at the next Hitchin Committee.

**James Willis:** suggested creating a short film about the arts diversity in the local area and the benefit this has to the community. He also spoke about the possibility of an ‘Arts breakfast’ similar to the Business Breakfasts which already take place in Hitchin.

**Summary:**

**Cllr Keith Hoskins:** It has been very useful to have an informal discussion and bring everyone together. We will distribute email addressed to keep the conversation going.

**Cllr Ian Albert:** Perhaps it would be worthwhile to have another meeting in January to follow up on this evening’s discussions.

Please could organisations in attendance tonight send any additional contacts to community@north-herts.gov.uk

More information on External Funding sources on the NHDC website here: <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/community/grants/external-funding-advice>

Cllr IA closed the meeting at 20:33.

**The next Town Talk will take place on Tuesday 1 December from 18:00 – 19:00 followed by Hitchin Committee at 19:30. Both will take place virtually.**